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THE CIVIL SERVICE

A Sketch of the Merit System

By

EDWARD CLARK MARSH

Chairman of the Publication Committee,
National Civil Service Reform League

With

Outline of Study Course in the
Civil Service of Our Government

By

Mrs. C. L. Atwood

National Civil Service Reform League

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A Sketch of the Merit System

When a man "sets up in business for himself," there is usually an ideal, or, if you prefer, an idea, back of his action. This idea is his business principle or policy, and in the beginning it is all-important, almost to the exclusion of every other consideration. He begins, let us say, in a small way, intent upon putting his principle to the test. At first he is not greatly concerned with organization. He does not bother about methods. It is the idea that counts; any method will do that helps put it into practice.

In somewhat that way our Government was established. When the Continental Congress issued its Declaration of Independence, the people of America decided to go into business for themselves. That decision was realized later in the adoption of a Constitution and the inauguration of our Federal Government. And it was the idea back of the new Government that absorbed attention, much more than methods of administration. So it is not surprising that in the beginnings of our independent government there was little discussion of an employment system. Systems come with growth. It is only in a big and highly organized business that these questions assume an importance which may mean life or death to the business.

The Merit System, so-called, is simply the name of a method of handling the problem of employment in the civil service. Strictly speaking, the term "civil service" embraces the entire body of persons in the service of any government, whether Federal, state, county, township, or municipality, except those in the military or naval service. But in common practice the term is applied to the great army of employees of the various civil organizations who are not elected, but appointed or hired.

An army, indeed. In the Federal service alone there are

more than 400,000 employees. It has been estimated that in the entire public service of the Federal Government and all the states, counties, towns, cities and villages there are nearly three million persons. One in every thirty-five persons—man, woman and child—draws pay from the government. And we pay them in a year, all told, something more than three billion dollars. Every head of a family puts his hand into his pocket each year and takes out on the average more than one hundred dollars to contribute to the pay of his public servants. The use of that money is a matter of some importance to every citizen. More than that, unless the citizen gets this money's worth, he will lose much more in a great number of ways from the workings of an inefficient government.

The Beginning of the Civil Service

This huge army has grown from very modest beginnings—only a few thousands when our national Government was founded. At first its management was not one of the major problems of government. The power of appointment to most of the higher positions was lodged in the President, with the advice and consent of the Senate. Naturally the question of removals soon came up. It was argued that under the Constitution removals too could only be made with the consent of the Senate, and that this constituted a danger. An officer might abscond while the Senate was not in session, and the President could not forthwith remove him. So the first Congress, in 1789, recognized the constitutional right of the President to act alone in the matter of removals; and the first weapon was forged for the spoilsman.

During these first years of the Republic parties were solidifying and partisan feeling was mounting. Offices increased in number, and politicians began to study the subtle uses of patronage. And in 1820 the second weapon of the spoils system was produced; a law was passed limiting to four years the term of office of district attorneys, collectors, and some other officials; postmasters were added in Jackson's administration.

The Spoils System

When the political overturn of Jackson's election occurred, there was already a strong demand that his friends should have

a material share in his triumph, a demand which was voiced later by Senator Marcy of New York in the memorable phrase: "To the victor belong the spoils." Jackson turned out a goodly number of incumbents to make room for his friends, though not so many as were displaced under later administrations.

However, the principle was established, and for a generation it held sway in the Federal Government, with scarcely a serious protest. Employees were organized with the precision of a machine to work night and day for the political fortunes of their superiors; indeed, they held their positions under a sort of feudal tenure of partisan service, while the "outs" were seeking to gain the patronage, and when successful they, in their turn, were equally organized, till at last the politics of the country were largely run in the interests not of the public but of the officeholders and their patrons.

Civil Service Reform in England

In the meantime England was meeting the same problem in a form aggravated by years of past corruption, and was proceeding in her slow, methodical way to seek a solution. In 1822 Sir Robert Peel caused to be inserted in the Metropolitan Police Law for London a provision that no one should be admitted as qualified for the office of inspector or superintendent who had not been trained by actual service in *each* subordinate rank. A few years later Lord Melbourne permitted *pass* examinations to be held in some offices. Once the method of examination had been sanctioned, certain public officers in sheer self-defense made use of it to procure better employees.

In 1854 a committee, of which Macaulay was a member, brought in a report which made the daring recommendation of an entirely open competition for place in the Indian service. The report was approved, and, in the words of Dorman B. Eaton, "the merit system was for the first time put into actual practice on a large scale." The time was now ripe for an almost equally thorough-going reform in the English home service. The way had indeed already been prepared by an able and exhaustive report advocating a system of competitive examinations submitted by Sir Stafford Northcote (afterwards Chancellor of the Exchequer) and Sir Charles Trevelyan in 1853. In 1855, when

Palmerston had become Prime Minister, an Order in Council put into effect its most important recommendations.

It was the end of the old system. In two years the House, which had disapproved the Order in Council by a close vote at the beginning, was passing a unanimous resolution calling for the extension of the principle of competition. The final step was taken July 4th, 1870, when an Order in Council abolished official patronage and substituted open competition.

The Flowering of the Spoils System

In the United States a hopeful beginning was made almost coincidentally with the first real advance in England. A law was passed in 1853 requiring non-competitive examinations in certain cases, and another law in 1864 provided for the examination of a number of consular clerks in the State Department. But these laws, which barely touched the fringes of the evil, were not followed up either by further legislation or by strong executive action, and they gradually fell into disuse.

The sudden increase in the number of offices to be filled after the Civil War brought the scandal to an issue. How far the system could go in destroying all possibility of administrative efficiency may be illustrated by the following, from the first annual report of the Civil Service Commission, 1884: "When Draper, a Republican, was collector of the port at New York, he removed a subordinate as often as every third day for a whole year. When Smyth, another Republican, succeeded Draper as collector in 1866 he removed 830 of his 903 Republican subordinates at the average rate of three every four days. When Grinnell, another Republican, succeeded Smyth as collector in 1869 he removed 510 out of his 892 Republican subordinates in sixteen months. When Murphy, another Republican, succeeded Grinnell as collector in 1870 he removed Republicans at the rate of three every five days until 338 had been cast out. It was the expectation of such spoils which gave every candidate for collector the party strength which secured his confirmation. Thus, during a period of five years in succession, collectors, all belonging to one party, for the purpose of patronage, made removals at a single office of members of their own party more frequently than at

the rate of one every day. In 1,565 secular days 1,678 such removals were made."

The Demand for Reform

There was in Congress during this period a representative from Rhode Island, Thomas Allen Jenckes, who is fairly entitled to be called the father of Civil Service Reform in the United States. Mr. Jenckes made a long and exhaustive study of the subject, and in 1868 brought in a report to the House as chairman of a Joint Select Committee on Retrenchment. Congress was indifferent, but the report and speeches of Jenckes aroused public interest and discussion. In 1871 a law was passed authorizing the President to make regulations for admission to the civil service which would improve its efficiency. President Grant promptly appointed George William Curtis chairman of the commission of seven members to carry out the law. The results, however, were disappointing. The commission labored under many embarrassments, and after 1873 Congress refused even the meager appropriation asked.

For a few years the commission lapsed, and the reform languished. But in 1877 Hayes came to the Presidency, strongly committed to the reform by a statement in his letter accepting the nomination. He revived the commission, with Dorman B. Eaton as its most influential member. As Secretary of the Interior he appointed Carl Schurz, one of the most vigorous and effective of the early advocates of reform. He reappointed Thomas L. James as postmaster of New York, and in this office as well as in the New York Customs House a thorough trial was made of the new method of appointment and promotion for fitness, with convincing results.

But something more dramatic than the sober and reasoned demand of President Hayes was required to crystallize public opinion and make it felt. In 1881 President Garfield, who had been a champion of the reform in Congress and had sadly disappointed its friends in his brief term, was assassinated by a disgruntled office-seeker. For years the early advocates of the fundamental reform—Sumner, Jenckes, Eaton, Curtis, Schurz—had endured the jibes and the abuse always in store for those

who attack entrenched corruption. Never had a band of reformers been more despised and hated. Suddenly they found themselves backed by a public demand that was irresistible. In the very month of August, 1881, while Garfield lay dying at Long Branch, the National Civil Service Reform League was started, with George William Curtis as its first president. The next year the Civil Service Reform bill, known as the Pendleton bill, was introduced by Senator George H. Pendleton of Ohio, and after passing both branches of Congress it became law by the approval of President Arthur on January 16, 1883.

The Pendleton Act

This statute, which was drafted at least in part by Dorman B. Eaton, has been called "one of the most skilfully devised statutes ever passed by a legislative body." It is still the basic law of the Federal civil service, and for nearly forty years it has resisted all effort either to improve it or to impair its effectiveness. It provided for "open competitive examinations for testing the fitness of applicants for the public service now classified or to be classified hereunder. Such examinations shall be practical in their character." It specified that positions should be filled "by selections according to grades from among those graded highest." An opinion of the Attorney-General held that this permitted a choice among the three highest qualified applicants for any position. It prohibited political assessments upon officeholders, and provided for the appointment of three commissioners, not more than two of whom should be adherents of the same political party. It placed the entire general administration of employment in the civil service in the hands of the Commission, leaving the preparation of suitable rules for the carrying out of its purpose to the President, with the assistance of the commissioners. The Pendleton bill and the law of 1871 thus placed large discretionary powers as to the administration of the civil service in the hands of the President. Dorman B. Eaton became a member of the first Civil Service Commission under the new law.

So far-reaching were the effects of the Pendleton act that from the date of its passage, except for a superannuation bill in 1920, there has been no further Federal legislation vitally affect-

ing the principles of the merit system. After 1883 the story shifts in the main from Congress to the executive. The first Commission prepared rules which were accepted with few changes by President Arthur, and the new method of appointment has been in operation ever since.

At the end of President Arthur's term, 15,573 places had been transferred to the classified service. Rhodes, in his *History of the United States*, volume VIII, gives, on the authority of D. M. Matteson, the following figures for the increments during succeeding administrations, these figures being exclusive of the growth of the service: "Cleveland, during his first term, added the railway P. O. service and revived the departmental classification, in number 11,757 places. Harrison classified the Indian service, Fish Commission, Weather Bureau and free delivery offices, having less than 50 men, adding 10,535 places. Cleveland, during his second term, made large additions, including the Internal Revenue, Government Printing Office, Custom House, Life Saving, Light-House services, Engineer Department of War Department, Ordnance Department, Navy Yard, rest of Indian service, Pension surgeons, in number 38,961 places. McKinley added 3,261 places. Roosevelt made numerous net additions, but the rural free delivery and the classification of fourth-class postmasters were the chief, in number (this does not include Panama Canal) 34,766 places. Taft: Assistant postmasters and clerks, navy-yard artisans, fourth-class postmasters, numbering 56,868. Wilson: The classified service had a large growth under Wilson, amounting on June 30, 1917, to about 40,000. Most of this is probably growth."

Competition by Executive Order

Aside from appointments vested in the President by the Constitution, there are more than 13,000 places, including postmasters of the first, second and third classes, collectors, marshals and district attorneys, which under act of Congress must be filled by presidential appointment, subject to confirmation by the Senate. These cannot be transferred to the classified service except by statute, but President Wilson, by an executive order of March 31, 1917, directed that open competitive examination

should be held for postmasterships of the first, second or third class vacant by death, resignation or removal, the highest qualified eligible to be appointed. President Harding, on May 10, 1921, changed this order, making it apply to all vacancies in the classes described, but permitting the Postmaster General to certify to the President for appointment any one of the highest three qualified eligibles.

The Merit System in the States

When we turn from the Federal service to that of the states, counties, townships and municipalities, we find, as might be expected, a somewhat less cheering picture. But at least it may be recorded that an encouraging start has been made. Of the states, New York was the first to place a civil service law upon her statute books. A law was passed in May, 1883, which related to the State service, and this was soon supplemented by one providing the same system for the larger cities of the state.

The operation of the merit system in the State of New York was such as to enable its supporters to contend successfully in the constitutional convention of 1894 for a clause writing the principle of the merit system into the constitution of the state. The wording of this clause has been so praised, and has served so often as a model for other constitutional clauses, that it is worth quoting here: "Appointments and promotions in the civil service of the state, and of all the civil divisions thereof, including cities and villages, shall be according to merit and fitness, to be ascertained, so far as practicable, by examination, which, so far as practicable, shall be competitive."

Massachusetts followed the example of New York, enacting in 1884 a civil service law, applicable to cities as well as to the state government. There followed years of progress in the perfecting of methods of applying the new system of appointments and promotions, but it was not until 1905 that Wisconsin passed a state law and Illinois made a partial reform, which was extended in 1911. Colorado and Indiana made a beginning in 1907, and New Jersey passed a comprehensive law in 1908. In 1912 Ohio adopted a constitutional amendment in favor of the merit system, and in the following year California came into line. Con-

necticut also in 1913 passed a weak law, which was repealed in 1921—the only instance of a state taking this backward step. Kansas placed its state service under the merit system in 1916. Colorado adopted a strong constitutional amendment in 1920, and in the same year Maryland passed an effective law.

The Merit System in Cities

The progress of the merit system in municipalities has been continuous though slow. In certain states the cities are brought under the operation of the state law—for the laws of the ten states now having civil service laws, as briefly enumerated above, differ widely in scope and effectiveness. In New York and Ohio all cities have their own commissions under the state law. In New Jersey the municipalities adopt the provision of the state law subject to a referendum to the voters (and it is interesting to note that in only one instance has a referendum in New Jersey been lost). In Massachusetts all cities are under the direct jurisdiction of the state commission. In other states many cities have adopted the merit system by special legislation or charter provision. When the bitter opposition of politicians is considered, it is a distinct cause for encouragement that more than 350 cities of the United States are under some form of civil service control. Of the one hundred largest cities in the country by the census of 1920, no less than 72 have adopted the merit system in whole or in part; and this number includes the twenty cities of largest population.

To those who are impatient for a political millennium, the progress of sound principles in dealing with the problem of civil employment may seem slow. It is only necessary, however, to glance back over the foregoing brief survey to realize the astonishing change that has taken place even within a generation.

Government as a Business Corporation

Yet a mere acceptance of the principle does not solve the problem, as may be realized by considering some of its implications.

The civil service should take no account of political questions as such. The Federal government is a huge corporation, a going

concern with an immense business to transact, possibly the largest single employer of labor in the world. In state and municipal affairs this aspect of government as a business corporation is even more prominent, and the political aspect less important, than in the Federal service.

From this point of view the citizens are stockholders of the corporation. The elected officers are its directors, and the civil service is the body of employees hired by the directors to carry on the business. Every citizen stockholder is vitally affected by the selection of these employees. Upon their efficiency depends in the largest degree the dividends which he draws from his corporation, in the way of police and fire protection, educational and business facilities, and all the hundred and one things for which his money pays, directly or indirectly, in the form of taxes.

Let us, then, place ourselves in the position of the stockholder in a corporation, and let us look upon the President, the Senators and Representatives, or the Mayor, the Comptroller and other elected officers of our city, as the men whom we have selected to conduct our business for us. That we shall expect them to pursue the general policy to which they pledged themselves in return for our vote goes without saying. But we want to know whether they have proved themselves competent executives, whether the organization has run smoothly, whether the work has been accomplished economically, with the wisest possible expenditure of the money we are putting into the business. Particularly we shall want to know whether they have practiced a true economy in the handling of their labor, which is perhaps the great test of administrative efficiency.

The Spoils System in Business

When we get at the facts, we learn that the man we have placed at the head of our affairs has curious ideas about the conduct of a business. His first act had been to dismiss as many of the old employees as possible without absolutely bringing the business to a halt. Not merely the heads of departments, mark you, but the rank and file. His own newly appointed heads of departments were authorized to fire indiscriminately, and to replace the old men with their personal friends.

When challenged, he admits the facts. His defense is: "To the victors belong the spoils." We shall make short shrift of him, for he is an anachronism. In his place we elect a hard-headed, self-made man, who has conducted a small business of his own with conspicuous success.

The new man promises well. He has no particular debts to pay with jobs, and he takes the work of administration seriously. But it is not long before we learn that he has a weakness. He prides himself on being "a judge of human nature." In his own business he employed only a handful of men, every one of whom he came to know personally. He hired and fired, and he was proud of the fact that he always made up his mind instantly whether he liked a man or not. Perhaps he was a judge of human nature. But he made the mistake of assuming that his heads of departments were equally infallible. We find his heads of departments all hiring men, dismissing men, without restraint, each according to his own will.

Evidently this president, too, must go. He was a good man in a small business, but this is a large business, and he is too ignorant of the methods by which big businesses are run in these days. A new president must be elected, and because the plant is now in shocking condition as a result of the labor difficulties of the previous incumbents, the stockholders insist that the new president shall be a man accustomed to the ways of modern business. Further, since a wise management of labor is at the very base of business efficiency, they insist upon the installation of an employment system such as the great corporations, like the Standard Oil Company and the Pennsylvania Railroad, have been driven to employ.

So important has this matter now become that a committee of the stockholders undertakes to outline the principles of a system that will result in economy and thus conserve their capital. After careful study of the methods employed by various big corporations, they bring in a plan, which proves to be very simple and largely a matter of common sense.

A Business Employment System

The first rule of the new system is that anyone may apply for a job, and stand as good a chance as anyone else if he can

show that he is qualified. This sounds so self-evident that it would scarcely have seemed necessary to state it, but for the fact that there had once been a rule that no man could get a job unless he was a friend of some man who already worked in the plant. The next is that every man applying for a job must fill out an application blank, and submit to a test of his qualifications for that particular job. A bookkeeper must demonstrate his ability to write a clear hand, his accuracy in figures, his knowledge of and experience in his trade. A machinist must show his familiarity with the tools he is to handle. These tests were called examinations, and there was some outcry at the word. But plumbers and carpenters who applied were soon to learn that the "examinations" were not concerned with ancient history and quadratic equations, but with their ability to do the work of plumbers and carpenters, shown largely by bench tests. And they learned too that the most skilful man generally stood highest in the test, and that he (or, in some cases, one of the three highest) got the job.

The committee of stockholders found that, according to the experience of great employers of labor, it was safer to take the work of employing men out of the hands of department heads and centralize it in a separate department. The department head has much to do, and the hiring of men is only an incident of his duties. He may dislike the work and do it badly, and there is always the danger that he may have favorites. Of course his advice and help would be invaluable as to his own department. He should be consulted as to kinds of tests for particular jobs, but the actual work of hiring was given to a commission of three, and their authority was made final.

The question of promotions and dismissals troubled the committee of stockholders not a little. At first it was thought that if methods of employment were sound, these other questions would not be troublesome. As one distinguished stockholder said of dismissals: "If the front door is properly safeguarded, the back door will take care of itself." But experience and investigation showed that it was almost as important to provide for removal of the incompetent, protection against removal or threat of removal of the capable, and retirement of the superannuated, as for a proper selection of material in the first place. In order

to lift the question of promotion above the caprice of the head of a department, it was ruled that a simple system of efficiency records should be kept in each department, and that promotion not only within the grade and department, but from grade to grade, as well as transfer from one department to another, should be made by the commission in accordance with these records, with an examination where new knowledge or different experience are required in the higher position.

As for dismissals, it was held that discipline required that the head of department should always have the power of removal for cause. But to aid him there should be employment experts to standardize work, introduce the best modern business methods, and give a scientific basis for ascertaining the incompetents who should be removed.

But what of the employee who has served the company faithfully, but has grown old in the service and incapable of performing his duties longer? Even the hard business man, supposedly without sentiment, cannot bring himself to turn such an employee out to starve. The obvious remedy would be a sound pension system, and the advice of actuarial experts was sought. The safest method, they said, was first to pay employees a decent wage, sufficient to enable them to save something, and then require them to create their own pension fund. A certain small percentage of each employee's wages, based on scientific principles, should be placed each year in the fund, which the corporation may not touch, though it should pay the costs of administration.

The stockholder's committee had not gone far in its labors before the question came up, how far the new rules were to be extended. One zealous member of the committee, a recent convert to "efficiency," contended that they should apply to every employee alike, from the president's confidential secretary to the janitors. He argued, with entire logic, that it was even more important to get the best qualified men for the higher positions than for subordinate places; that a test of fitness could be applied to the treasurer of the company as well as to a messenger boy (though it would have to be a very different sort of test); and he ended by advocating that the stockholders should elect

an employment commission of three, who should be absolutely responsible for all appointments, even that of president.

The argument was persuasive, and met with much approval. Nevertheless the committee decided on a modification of the plan. It was pointed out that the president, for instance, as head of the company, must largely determine its policies; that he must be in contact with the directors, so that personality counted for something; in short, that more was involved in his election than purely administrative efficiency. In lesser degree the same was true of other high officers, who would be closely associated with him in determining policies. It was decided that offices which had to do directly with the determining of policies should be filled either by direct election of the stockholders or by appointment of the president; that their functions should be confined to the determination of policies, but that all other heads of departments and high officials charged with carrying out those policies and entrusted with promotions and dismissals of subordinates and general detail administration should be experts selected by experts; that is, that there should be a distinct separation of the individuals entrusted with determining policies from those entrusted with the carrying out of those policies; that the former should be elected or freely appointed and the latter selected by competition. Not only would discipline be better, but a body of trained experts would be established, who would introduce efficient management into every department; for it is not enough for the success of a corporation to have good buildings, efficient subordinates, and wise general policies, but there must be good managers of the details of production and control of discipline.

Again, to assist in making dismissals and promotions, it was found that standards for measuring the amounts and quality of work, both group and individual, were helpful, and in adopting modern business methods, such as proper routing, saving unnecessary steps of employees, getting rid of unnecessary duplication of work, and the like, it was advantageous to bring employment and efficiency experts into the departments. Some corporations carrying out this policy had changed loss into profit.

And the committee rested from its labors.

The Aim of Civil Service Reform

Is this a fanciful picture of the principles and the working of what used to be called with utter contempt "snivel service reform?" In essentials, no. In the recommendations of this imaginary committee of business men there is nothing that is not either a part of the actual workings of the so-called "merit system" in some civil service, or a definite part of the program of the National Civil Service Reform League. In one important historical aspect it is fictitious. Our imaginary committee is represented as copying its recommendations from the practice of the great corporations. Actually the employing systems now in effect in many of these corporations were antedated by the work of the Federal Civil Service Commission and by some of the state and municipal commissions. The business man has taken a leaf from the book of the once despised reformer!

Are Examinations Practical?

Since the commonest of all objections to the competitive examination of civil employees is that the examinations are not practical, it will be interesting to quote one of the most competent authorities on this point, Mr. George R. Wales, formerly Chief Examiner of the Federal Civil Service Commission, and now one of the three members of the Commission:

"An essential part of the functions of a civil service commission, as of any other employment office, is to conduct *constant* research and investigation as to the appropriateness of its examinations. There is no such thing as *the* civil service examination, as is attested by the fact that during the fiscal year ended June 30, 1920, the Commission held 917 different kinds of examinations, not including the so-called non-educational examinations for trades or mechanic positions. Nor is the form of an examination for any particular position fixed once and for all; on the contrary, it is constantly changing. A good example of this is the changes that have taken place in the familiar examination given for entrance to the general clerical grades in the departments at Washington. This so-called general examination has been changed since 1883 no less than thirteen times.

"This same history of changes could be repeated with respect to all the other examinations which the Commission has held for any period of years, for the reason that Governmental activities reflect any change in educational or industrial activities, and the Commission endeavors to keep abreast of these changes. During the period of the war, for example, when ordinary conditions were reversed, and the Government became the seeker for workers instead of the workers seeking positions with the Government, examinations were stripped practically to the simple proposition of determining eligibility, because all persons found eligible were almost assured of appointment; but this does not mean that the standard of eligibility was in any essential lowered. Now that conditions are gradually tending toward normal, however, the Commission is not off-hand restoring the pre-war tests, but is making such investigations as its limited appropriations permit to ascertain as nearly as may be the appropriateness of each form of examination to test fully the qualifications required in any group of positions."

The Non-Assembled Test

But the politician has still one ambush from which to attack a system which he abhors. Such examinations may be all right for stenographers and clerks, he says, but it will never work for the higher positions. You can't bring a lot of doctors, for instance, into a school room and examine them to select a health officer. Good men will refuse to submit to such an examination, and you will only get the incompetents. It was precisely to meet this objection that the so-called non-assembled test was devised and put in practice. The somewhat formidable phrase means simply that candidates are not required to assemble in a room and take the examination simultaneously. A certain task is sometimes set, designed to test the fitness of the candidate (for example, in the case of an engineer it may be the writing of a thesis or article), and in addition and mainly, a searching scrutiny is made of the candidate's record to ascertain his past education, training, achievements, and personal qualifications.

By means of the non-assembled test the United States Civil Service Commission has filled hundreds of highly technical posi-

tions requiring executive and organizing ability in the Bureau of Mines, the Interstate Commerce Commission, the Public Health Service, the Forestry Service, and many other bureaus and departments; and the high standard of work in the scientific and technical branches of the government service has been thus successfully maintained. In Chicago, such positions as city engineer, city auditor, and chief librarian, at salaries ranging from \$3,000 to \$8,000 a year, have been filled. In New York City, when the office of coroner was abolished and the position of Chief Medical Examiner substituted, the position was filled most satisfactorily by non-assembled competitive examination.

An interesting test of the workings of this method was the selection by non-assembled competitive examination, under the President's Executive Order, of a postmaster for the city of Worcester in 1918. There were about twenty-four candidates, the salary being \$6,000, at that time the largest ever paid to a competitive employee in the Federal service. Immediately after the appointment of the candidate of highest standing, the National Civil Service Reform League wrote to about thirty prominent business and professional men of Worcester, of both parties, asking their opinion of the results of the competition. The answers to these letters showed a striking unanimity. It was agreed not only that competition was an immense improvement over the old ways of politics, but that the man who received the appointment was the best person available.

Altogether about one thousand such positions, including that of postmaster of Boston, with a salary of \$8,000 a year, have been so filled. This, after all, is practically the method that the president of a great railroad would pursue in seeking to find a competent division head.

The Cost of the Merit System

Such is the story of the method of applied common sense wherever it has been fairly tested. In summary of the value and cost of the work of the Federal Commission, it will be illuminating to quote Mr. Wales once more:

"How well or how ill does the Commission perform its work and how much does it cost are two natural and proper questions

which should be answered. Fortunately the Federal merit system has been in effect sufficiently long to reach certain conclusions. During the administration of President Taft an economy and efficiency commission was formed of outside experts who made a partial study of the Government service, including in some offices an investigation as to efficiency of employees relatively to their ratings in the civil service examination through which they entered the service. That Commission reported a remarkable correspondence between the ratings; that is, the employees having the highest record for efficiency also had attained in most instances the highest ratings in the civil service examination. That report, of course, argued for the practicality of the entrance test.

"Figures also have been compiled covering the Internal Revenue Service under the pre-war laws and showing that it cost materially less per capita to collect the taxes when deputy collectors were under the civil service system, as they were in 1912, than when outside that system, as in 1896. Since 1913 these local deputy collectors of Internal Revenue have again been exempted by statute from civil service examinations.

"The Railway Mail Service statistics are likewise most interesting. Records of individual performance are kept annually for this service by the Post Office Department, and they show that for the seven years immediately preceding the application to this service of the competitive examination system the number of pieces of mail distributed by each employee annually averaged 1,230,731, the number correctly distributed for each error being 3,931. The average number of errors made by each employee annually in distribution was 335. A steady gain was shown each year following classification, but grouping together the twenty years following classification, the average number of pieces distributed annually by each employee was 1,504,164, an increase of about twenty per cent. For the first decade following classification the errors averaged one to every 8,627 pieces of mail distributed, or 183 per employee annually. For the second decade the errors averaged one to every 11,307 pieces of mail distributed, or 131 to each employee annually.

"Some of this notable improvement in efficiency in the Railway Mail Service was doubtless due to better conditions under

which the work was done and to better administrative methods; but the competitive examination system is clearly entitled to a share in the cause of this showing of efficiency and economy, and this seems especially true of the decreases in errors. It is fair also to add that the examination system without question contributed to better methods of administration by providing a more intelligent and capable force, and one more amenable to discipline than could have been obtained under the patronage system. Furthermore, it is in point to emphasize here the fact that the merit system affords the Government the entire population as a recruiting field, whereas under patronage the field of choice is limited by personal or political acquaintance or favoritism. The head of the Railway Mail Service at the time officially stated that he could not have secured this increased efficiency without the aid of the merit system.

“The foregoing figures as to the Internal Revenue and the Railway Mail Service afford a comparison between the merit system and the spoils or patronage system, with the inevitable conclusion that the former gets the best results at the lowest cost; but the recent war with Germany afforded far more interesting comparisons between the civil service merit system and the usual system in private industry, and the result again was to the credit of the merit system, and overwhelmingly so. One example only is cited. In a statement issued about two years ago by the Naval Aircraft Factory at Philadelphia, which was organized and administered principally by business and industrial experts, the following appeared:

“On October 1, 1917, the first mechanic was hired at the Naval Aircraft Factory, the only government-owned institution of its kind in the United States. On November 1, 1918, there were 3,642 men and women employed in building flying boats for the Navy. . . . Out of the nearly 4,000 employees at work today not more than 25 had previous experience in other aircraft factories. . . . Civil Service rules, at first looked upon as a handicap, had to be dealt with and naval regulations were to be taken into consideration at every step. . . . Testimony of the generally satisfactory caliber of the employees secured under civil service is found in the fact that it was necessary to hire a total of only 6,035 persons to provide for the growth of force and for replacements. In private industry it is often necessary to hire eight to ten persons before a satisfactory employee is secured. Further

testimony of the generally satisfactory caliber of the working force recruited under civil service is found in the fact that only 139 persons have been discharged for cause since the start of the factory.'

"Industrial experts, after making surveys of representative plants, have stated that it cost from \$75 to \$150 to train each new employee, and have argued from this the necessity of establishing a definite employment policy to reduce turnover. The experience of the Naval Aircraft Factory, as reported in the preceding paragraph, demonstrates how effectively the merit system accomplishes this result. The work of a civil service commission therefore is not an overhead charge on a government, but is an essential part of its productive machinery.

"The ultimate saving brought about by a practical employment policy would justify considerable expenditures to maintain it, and yet the figures compiled by the Federal Commission show only moderate cost for the results attained. Taking into consideration every item of cost in the Commission's work, including the services of employees of field offices detailed as members of boards of examiners to conduct examinations, it cost the Government only \$6.37 to make each of 179,533 appointments during the year ended June 30, 1919. Using this same total of expenditures it cost the Government \$2.61 to examine each of 438,269 competitors during the same period.

"Viewing the cost of the Commission's work from another angle, it may be stated that the yearly cost to the Government for all the activities of the Commission for a period of ten years, ending June 30, 1920, was only \$1.17 per person on payroll. This compares favorably with the cost of \$4.40 per person on payroll of fourteen of the largest private employers in the United States, to whom the Commission recently sent a questionnaire designed to elicit information as to the relative expense of employment offices in private industry. It is, of course, only fair to add that these employment offices usually conduct welfare work that is not within the functions of the Federal Commission; but, on the other hand, they are not required to make investigations as to prohibited political activity, nor to maintain a careful system of certifying eligibles under an apportionment of appointments among the different states, and for charging against the respec-

tive states all appointments in the Departmental Service at Washington, with credit to the appropriate state for each separation from such service."

The Price of Efficiency

In theory, the Merit System is well established. Few men in this day of business efficiency would care to advocate openly a wholesale return to the old spoils method of filling public offices. The Merit System has been endorsed by practically every statesman whose guidance has in recent years been generally accepted by the people.* Is the fight then won? Should the National Civil Service Reform League and its constituent state associations disband? Can the citizen, the stockholder in this great enterprise of popular government, sit back and congratulate himself that all goes well with the business of which he is one of the owners? The truth is that, much as has already been done, the great work of Civil Service Reform remains to be accomplished. It will not be finished until the employment methods, not only of the Federal Government, but of every state and municipality, are on a par with the best knowledge and practice of modern business. It must not be forgotten that in thirty-eight out of forty-eight states there is as yet no effective barrier to the use of places as the spoils of office. Hundreds of cities still fill their places in accordance with ideas that originated in and were appropriate to the Dark Ages.

But even though there were model laws, there would still be need for increasing vigilance to see that the laws were not evaded. The spoilsman, defeated in the open, becomes a guerilla warrior, seeking to debauch the service through constant appeals for exemptions from sound rules.

The overcrowding of office with supernumeraries to give jobs to politicians rather than because their services are needed is notorious. Again and again requests have been made for many persons who were thought to be exempted and when found they were under the civil service rules their services were not required. The Boston Board of Aldermen voted for an assistant director

*See quotations from American Statesmen on last page.

for the very few ferry boats in Boston Harbor. The one slated for the position was a brother of a leading Alderman. When it was found that to fill the position required open competitive examination, the Board withdrew the appropriations and abolished the office.

The most striking case was that in the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, where the United States notes and bonds were made. It had been exempted from the civil service rules and had become a favorite dumping ground for the favorites of members of Congress. It was officially reported by a committee of the Senate and confirmed by Mr. Graves, the head of the department, that he had about 575 supernumerary employees who were so in the way of the regular workers that shelves had to be provided in which they spent the larger part of their time in sleep. The total unnecessary cost for these was in the neighborhood of \$400,000 a year.

Reclassification

Even where the modern business system has made headway, it is often incomplete and badly administered. In the Federal system, for example, the jurisdiction of the Commission extends in practice only to appointments. Having certified an appointee, it has no means of following that appointee, of checking and correcting its work in the light of subsequent experience. There is indeed no sort of system of co-operation between departments as to employees. One department may have a plethora of stenographers, another may be badly in need of them; but the separating walls are watertight. The classification of employees of the Federal Government is at present a hodge-podge, a thing of hoary traditions and precedents, some of them inherited from the very beginnings of the Republic. One of the great tasks in which the League is now engaged is to assist in the imperative work of reclassifying the service, applying the equitable and economical principle that the same work shall receive the same rates of pay (subject only to regular automatic advances for service after the first year for exceptional efficiency) by requiring all Government authorities, once the fact of similarity in duties is determined by the Commission, to make all salary rates within

the class uniform. To this end a committee of the League made up of men of experience in the civil service, as administrators, and in the preparing of legislation, has made an exhaustive investigation and has embodied its results in a bill which has been placed at the disposal of the appropriate committees of Congress.

A Pension System

Until recently there was no general provision in the Federal service for retirement and pension. It was largely owing to the activities of the League that this subject came up for legislation, resulting in the passage of a retirement act in 1920. The act, though a step in the right direction, does not conform to all the principles advocated by the League, and leaves room for future work in procuring its amendment and improvement.

Extension of the Classified Service

There are still over 13,000 positions in the Federal service which must be filled by law by appointment of the President, confirmed by the Senate. No valid reason exists why these places, excepting only those of the highest administrative and judicial officers, should not be filled by competitive examination. Two Presidents in succession have recognized this as to far the greater number of these positions; namely, postmasters of the first, second and third classes, by executive orders which direct the Civil Service Commission to hold examinations, and pledge the appointment in accordance therewith. It is highly desirable, however, that both the postmasters and the other officers of the group, including United States marshals, collectors, and district attorneys, should be transferred by legislative enactment to the classified service.

Promotions

Promotions in the Federal service have long constituted a problem. One or two important departments have instituted promotion systems, but in general, aside from infrequent special promotion examinations, promotion depends upon the attentiveness or the caprice of the head of the department. Obviously

promotion should be based upon past performance; and this implies a system of records of the efficiency of employees. Under the Federal law the Commission apparently has jurisdiction over promotions, but in practice, because of lack of appropriations and because of lack of an adequate classification of the Federal service, it has been able to do little in this matter. Experiments in the matter of service records have been made by various commissions, notably in New York, both city and state. The results of these experiments have varied, and the best method is perhaps yet to be found. Such experiments as have been made, however, show that in the last analysis the success of any system will depend largely upon the person administering it. And that is one of the reasons why the heads of the departments who are not the policy-determining officials should be selected by competition and not on political grounds. An incompetent or indifferent head of department can defeat the purposes of the best of systems, and public administrators still need a vast amount of education as to their business responsibility in the huge corporation of government.

An objection once commonly urged against the merit system (it is not so often heard nowadays) was that it established a life tenure—that once in the service an employee, no matter how incompetent, was protected in his job as long as he chose to hold it. Nothing of the sort, of course, was ever advocated by those who have had the good of the public service at heart, nor has any so-called civil service reform law ever contained such provision. In all Government service it is essential that the responsible head of department should have the right to remove an incompetent employee, and the National League has never advocated taking away this right. It has insisted, however, that there should be no right to remove for political reasons. On the other hand, it has opposed the review by the courts of grounds of a removal with its consequent impairment of discipline, uncertainty of tenure, delay, cost and demands upon the precious time of the removing official.

Veteran Preference

Since the world war a new and subtle danger has threatened the civil service in a widespread demand that war veterans be

given preference in appointment to public service. This danger is new only in the magnitude it has acquired since the war; in principle it is older than the merit system itself. Shortly after the Civil War a law was passed giving preference in the Federal service to veterans of that war, discharged because of wounds or sickness incurred in the line of duty, and nearly every state had a similar provision. Paradoxically, these laws became harmful only as the practice of appointment for merit gained ground. So long as appointments were made for political reasons, it made little difference that the politician was theoretically bound to appoint veterans first. But in spite of the specious appeal to patriotic sentiment, it will readily be seen what such a law means when applied to a business organization. Consider, for example, the situation in the State of New York, in which a proposed amendment to this effect was defeated in the election of November, 1921. There are in the state about 125,000 positions subject to civil service rules. There are about half a million veterans. The amendment, had it passed, would have meant that any veteran who could barely pass the examination for a given place (with a mark of seventy or even sixty-five) would be preferred for appointment to the non-veteran with a mark of ninety-nine. Recently some accountants for the income tax department of the United States Treasury were selected from the civil service lists. Under the veteran preference law some who had obtained between 65 and 70 only, on a combination of experience and knowledge, but who were veterans, had to be preferred to others with splendid records of experience and passing almost perfect tests of knowledge of the subject. As returns covering billions of dollars a year have to be inspected by these accountants, one can see the enormous loss to the Government and trouble to honest business men that would be caused by forcing the far less competent into the Government service.

This premium upon relative incompetence at once encourages the incompetent veteran to try for appointment, and discourages the competent non-veteran. The effect of the law within a few years, when veterans who had failed in the open competition of business life had gradually drifted into the public service, would be literally disastrous. It is a sorry sort of patriotism

that would reward men for doing their duty by debauching the public service in their interest. The Civil Service Reform League and its constituent Associations oppose such legislation with all their strength, solely on patriotic grounds. As might be expected, they have the support of great numbers of the veterans themselves, who ask no odds for themselves, but who demand that no such misguided efforts shall distract attention from the plain duty of the Government to rehabilitate or care for the wounded and disabled veteran.

The Program of the Future

Here, then, is the program of the National Civil Service Reform League: In the main it is to secure efficiency, economy and business management in the government service and to destroy the corrupting spoils system and to that end to extend the principles and practice of the merit system to the thirty-eight states and the hundreds of cities and counties which are now without adequate laws; to extend the Federal law and the state laws already in existence to cover positions now exempt; to assist in perfecting methods of administration in conformity with the soundest business theory and practice; to resist at every turn the attempt of the man who is in politics for what there is in it to bring the public service back under his control. It is a big program, and the work will not be done in a few years; but as to its soundness and its importance there can scarcely be two opinions among honest men and women, and it should command the support of every good citizen.

STUDY COURSE IN THE CIVIL SERVICE OF OUR GOVERNMENT

Prepared by Mrs Clarence L. Atwood,
Chairman, Minnesota Federation of Women's Clubs

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"The merit system of making appointments is in its essence as democratic and American as the common school system itself. It simply means that in clerical and other positions, where the duties are entirely non-political, the applicants should have a fair field and no favor."

THEODORE ROOSEVELT.

"We have nothing more important in relation of the administration of government than a system—the best that has yet been devised—of securing men of the needed capacity by competitive examinations, whenever such examinations are practicable. I believe in that; I thoroughly endorse it, and I hope to see it extended throughout the States of the Union."

CHARLES E. HUGHES.

"Civil service reform is so fundamental that all other reforms must rest on it."

CHARLES W. ELIOT.

"The spoils system is not essential to effective party organization. On the contrary, it tends to prevent effective party organization. It tends to keep out of the organization the men whose services would be most effective."

ELIHU ROOT.

"I am, if possible, more than ever convinced of the incalculable benefits conferred by the civil service law, not only in its effects upon the public service but also what is even more important, in its effect in elevating the tone of political life generally."

GROVER CLEVELAND.

"If we selected employes according to the length of their noses, it would be better than the political spoils system of appointment."

WILLIAM H. TAFT.

"I am a hearty believer in the principles of civil service reform and shall take pleasure at all times in doing what I can to promote those principles in practice."

WOODROW WILSON.

"The whole subject of government efficiency and government thrift compels my interest because it is outrageous for public administration, which should be an example and a guide to our people, to indulge in waste and extravagant inefficiency. As any business man knows, the conduct of his business depends upon the men who do it. Therefore, though the necessity for a budget system is great, perhaps even greater is the need for a system which will give Federal employes a square deal in promotions, pay and continuity of service while obtaining for the Nation's taxpayers, in return, a high standard of skill and continued loyalty among the employes who serve them."

WARREN G. HARDING.

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